

THE FEDERAL ISSUE SHIRT

Stephen Osman

The United States Army's most widely issued pattern of shirt for enlisted soldiers changed little between the War of 1812 and 1872. There was no "pattern" or "model" of 1851, 1852, 1854 or other dates, as sometimes claimed. Several types of flannel shirts were issued during the Civil War, but there was one style that was by far the most common.

Until around 1851 enlisted soldiers were allotted four shirts a year, two of cotton and two of flannel, all issued in only one large size. In 1851 issue of the cotton shirts was eliminated. Issue of the flannel one was continued with the statement, "flannel shirt ... the same as now furnished." Enlisted men were now allowed three such shirts a year.

These shirts can be documented from original specimens, photographs, and government specifications. A carefully preserved example, exchanged with the Danish government in 1858, exists in a Copenhagen museum. It is off-white or cream-colored flannel (wool on a cotton warp) with a reinforced slit front opening, a squared collar closed by a single stamped sheet iron button, tapered sleeves with internally faced cuffs formed as part of the sleeve and closed by single buttons, a reinforcing strap across the top of each shoulder, and very full cut in the body. Two very similar shirts are at the National Museum of American History, differing in having separately attached cuffs and in lacking a reinforce under the front slit opening. A privately-owned example has cuffs like the one in Denmark but lacks the front slit reinforce. Another example in a Wisconsin museum has separate cuffs and no slit reinforce. All the extant shirts examined are completely sewn by hand with relatively wide stitches.

Numerous photographs of soldiers wearing the issue shirt can be found in the photographic histories of the Civil War, once one knows the pattern to look for. A series of photographs taken in 1875 by the Quartermaster General shows the "shirt ... old pattern, prior to 1872." The images show a shirt of the same pattern as the Danish and other specimens, without cuffs but of off-white flannel with slit front and squared collar.

Government specifications for shirts required 2 7/8 yards (about 31" wide) of wool domest flannel, three shirt buttons of white metal, and 3 1/2 skeins of natural, undyed linen thread. All seams were to be felled. The major measurements

included: length of shirt 34", of sleeve 21", and of collar 16" or 17"; width of shirt 26", of sleeve 20" at the top, of sleeve at cuff 10", and of collar 3 1/2"; shoulder straps 9" long by 3" wide and of underarm gussets 5" by 3". Original specimens show some variance from these measurements.

Wearing such shirts may not be enjoyable, but it was period practice. Even after the three hot July days of the fighting at Gettysburg, Federal burials could be distinguished from those of their foes, "... the underclothing was the next part examined. The Rebel cotton undershirt gave proof of the army in which he belonged." Federals were in wool.

Good reproductions of Federal issue shirts may be had from County Cloth, 13797-C Georgetown St. NE, Paris, OH 44669; ph. (216) 862-3307. County Cloth supplies finished shirts; they can also provide patterns and flannel by the yard, and sell kits for the issue shirt. Federal reenactors should remember that many soldiers wore privately-obtained cotton shirts in place of issue shirts, but probably not in the carnival assortment of styles, sizes, and colors offered by many sutlers.

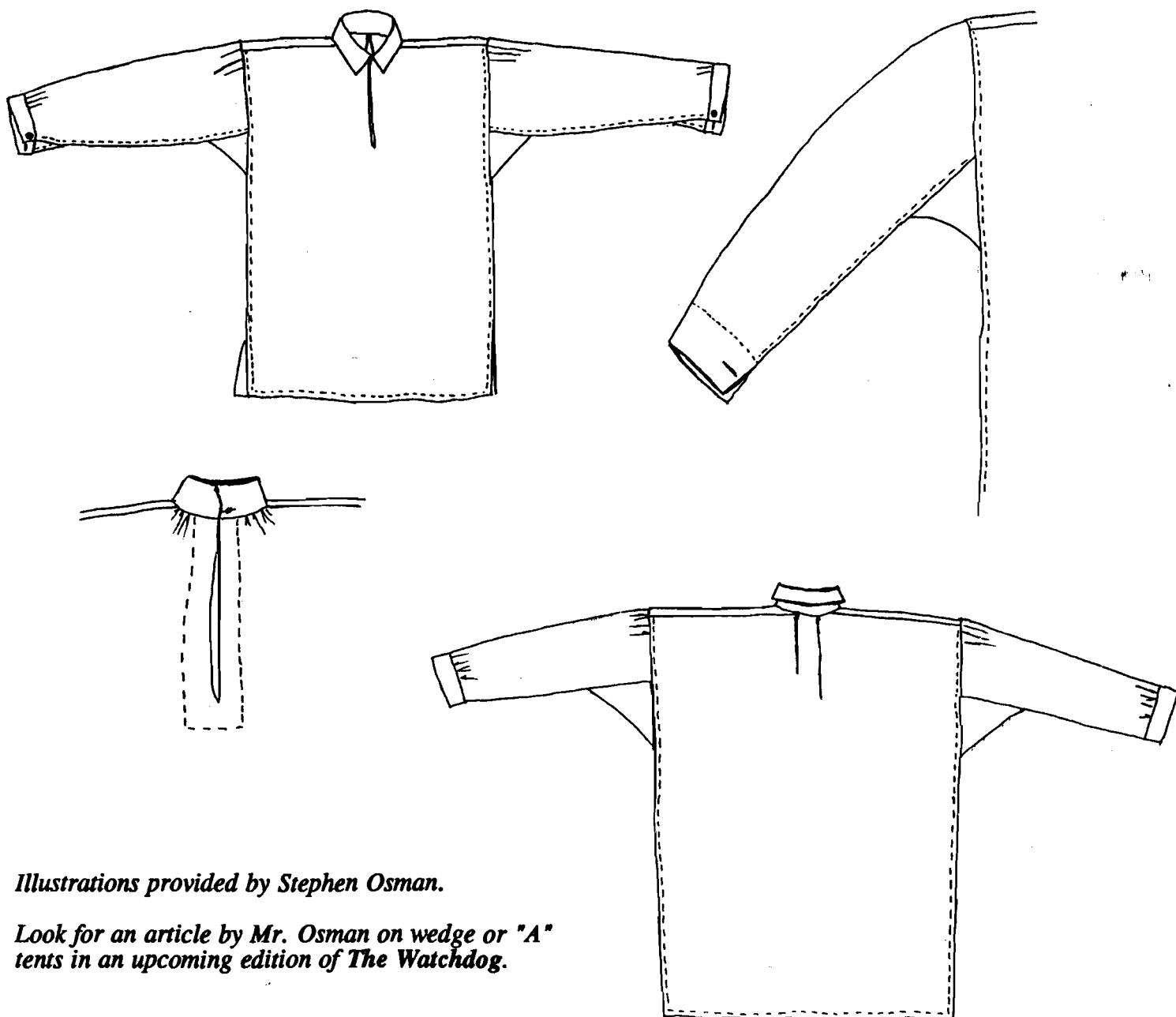
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Illustrations provided by Stephen Osman.

Look for an article by Mr. Osman on wedge or "A" tents in an upcoming edition of The Watchdog.